

Public Asset Management: The case of the Capanema Palace

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Abstract

This article examines the contemporary condition of the Gustavo Capanema Palace, an emblematic modernist building located in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, currently marked by degradation and institutional underuse. Drawing on Adorno, Benjamin, Schorske and other theoretical interlocutors, we argue that public heritage management is inseparable from broader social imaginaries concerning the city, culture and state. Through a historically informed analysis, we interrogate the tension between modernist ideals of circulation, sociability and openness, and the current stagnation that transforms the building into a “statue” rather than a lived civic space. We further suggest that policies influenced by neoliberal ideology in the 1990s contributed to chronic infrastructure neglect, demonstrating a persistent political hierarchy in which development precedes culture and heritage preservation. We conclude by advocating for a renewed public conception of cultural assets not as static commodities, but as catalysts for collective urban life.

1. Introduction

The idea for this study emerged from an unplanned visit to the Palácio Gustavo Capanema, located in downtown Rio de Janeiro. During this visit, we observed a series of structural and functional problems within the building, also known as the “MEC,” due to having once housed Brazil’s Ministry of Education and Culture. Among the issues identified were: vast and unused interior spaces, visible deterioration of both the internal and external structure, malfunctioning elevators limited in their capacity to transport passengers, and a poorly maintained and underutilized library. These concerns were later echoed and amplified by a report in *Veja Rio* magazine (09/15/2010), which brought broader public attention to the matter.

The property, designated as a national heritage site by IPHAN (National Institute of Historic and Artistic Heritage) in 1948, appeared more like a monumental statue, untouched yet deteriorating under the forces of time, distancing passersby with its aged surface, its lack of maintenance, and even posing risk to those who approach. A sense of melancholy and abandonment seems almost palpable in the building’s current state. This striking impression led us to formulate three preliminary hypotheses: (1) mere negligence toward public property? (2) a misunderstanding of modernist ideals? or (3) disdain for such ideals?

Naturally, within the boundaries of this paper, we cannot attempt to resolve such questions definitively, nor exhaust the debate they open. They serve instead as conceptual points of departure, guiding reflections rather than determining them. Our objective is to sketch a mapping of issues that might open pathways for future research, ideally more systematic and extensive. It is important, therefore, to state explicitly that we do not aspire to exhaust the subject. Quite the opposite: we aim only to illuminate a set of questions that we consider central to discussions in urban history, heritage conservation, urban planning, and public policy, fields that overlap deeply. Even if no final conclusions can be drawn at this stage, our primary purpose

is to enhance visibility, stimulate debate, and support continued investigation. This work should thus be read as a starting point, an embryonic effort rather than a final word, an essay that assembles questions, perspectives, and theoretical provocations on the management and use of public heritage, here exemplified by the case of Palácio Capanema.

We therefore adopt what Theodor Adorno referred to as *the essay as form*, a tradition long present within Brazilian social thought. As Adorno (1991) explains:

The essay does not begin with Adam and Eve, but with what it wishes to discuss; it says what occurs to it and ends where it feels it has concluded, not where nothing else remains to be said (p. 15).

The essay format carries a productive form of risk, an openness to reflect on what one does not fully master, without the pretense of expert totality. It remains, by nature, exposed to error. As Adorno (1991) further states:

Its affinity with open intellectual experience comes at the cost of a lack of certainty, something that established thought fears as death itself. The essay not only refrains from seeking absolute certainty; it renounces its ideal. It becomes true through movement, by thinking beyond itself, rather than through the obsession of securing unshakable foundations (p. 45).

It is necessary to acknowledge the subjective origins of this inquiry (a casual walk through the building), the experience that triggered our desire to explore and research Palácio Capanema more deeply. Yet, however relevant such subjective impulses may be, they cannot determine the study's outcomes. Beyond personal experience, we consider Capanema a *symptom* of how culture and public heritage are regarded in Brazil, often seen as secondary, less urgent than “*development*,” whether economic or social.

2. Theoretical Framework

We begin by defining a set of theoretical parameters, what we call our theoretical effort. If this essay contains a central argument, it lies in our view that many of the problems and misunderstandings related to the management and preservation of public heritage stem from how we perceive and conceptualize the city itself. This is not, strictly speaking, a novel hypothesis. Scholars such as Robert Pechman and Eliana Kuster, for instance, demonstrate, through literature, how the imaginary values we attribute to the city shape its meaning within specific historical contexts. In other words, questions of heritage are inseparable from the ways in which we know, perceive, and experience urban space.

In this brief theoretical trajectory, we draw on authors who help us reconsider how we see the city and, in this case, Palácio Capanema, not only as architectural form but as a sociopolitical construct. This perspective requires approaching built space as something filled, shaped, and transformed by social relations. Philosophically, we propose a framework that emphasizes the union between form and function, between urban morphology and social experience, and between the material city and the sociabilities it sustains. As Adorno (1991) reminds us:

In the allergy to forms, dismissed as mere accident, academic scientific reason approaches the same dogmatic obtuseness it claims to oppose. (p. 56).

This implies a double challenge. First, we must reinsert the city and its forms into history, moving away from timeless analyses that read the object as a self-contained artifact. Second, we must avoid reducing form to a mere reflection of external forces such as material availability, technical innovation, fashion, or power structures. Instead, we adopt a dialectical approach, neither form without history nor history without form.

Likewise, we reject an uncritical relationship with the past, as if history existed as a neutral archive of ready-made facts, a treasury of reference models awaiting reactivation. Walter Benjamin reminds us that the past reaches us through political struggle, through selective memory, silence, and erasure. It does *not* come to us as a stable deposit of cultural goods, resting untouched in the drawers of time. A critical engagement with history requires relinquishing certain certainties so that *another sense of the past may emerge, and with it, another future.*

Our reading of present urban space, particularly Rio de Janeiro, is shaped by this critical stance. We understand the contemporary city, following Pechman and Kuster's reading of Hannah Arendt, as a space increasingly depoliticized: where power, understood as *collective action based on shared agreements*, erodes in favor of fragmented individualities. In such conditions: when what prevails is the assertion of private identities, the capacity to see the Other diminishes; the city ceases to function as a public arena grounded in collective agreements and becomes instead a *citadel*, where order arises not from solidarity but from the imposition of force.

We therefore defend an approach that reunites politics and culture, social relations and urbanism, heritage and collective life, an analytical lineage exemplified by Carl E. Schorske in his study of fin-de-siècle Vienna. Although distinct from our case, Schorske (1981) offers methodological insight: he examines urban reform and architectural innovation not as isolated phenomena but as aesthetic–social signs of historical transformation. He weaves together architecture, literature, painting, and politics much like a weaver assembling threads into fabric:

The historian is the weaver; the quality of the cloth depends on the firmness of the threads. Specialized disciplines may spin

finer fibers, but the historian must weave them into meaning.
(Schorske, 1981, p. 127)

In this spirit, we seek to read the city, and Palácio Capanema, as a textile of forms and forces, where architectural language both expresses and is shaped by political content. The inseparability of *form* and *meaning*, *architecture* and *power*, is therefore not rhetorical but structural, a key premise guiding the analysis that follows.

3. The Capanema Palace in Historical Context

It is worth recalling that Palácio Capanema has not always appeared as it does today, deteriorated and underutilized. Constructed between 1936 and 1945, during the Vargas Era (1930–1945), the building was designed to house the Ministry of Education and Public Health at a time when education and culture were viewed as central to the political construction of a national identity.

It is no coincidence, therefore, that such an institution was placed within a modernist building, a movement then associated with the symbolic rupture from past traditions and the claim to a new aesthetic and ideological horizon. The project was led by some of the most prominent figures in Brazilian architecture: Lúcio Costa, Oscar Niemeyer, Affonso Eduardo Reidy, Ernani Vasconcellos, Carlos Leão, and Jorge Machado Moreira. Its conceptual foundations drew heavily from the functionalist principles of the Swiss-French architect Le Corbusier, who visited Brazil in 1929 and served as consultant to the team, becoming one of modernism's key references in architectural discourse.

Among the features that define the building's modernist character, we highlight the suspension of its fourteen-story main block over ten-meter pilotis, an element designed to integrate the

structure with street life, creating visual permeability and pedestrian flow beneath it. This approach contrasts sharply with the neighboring Ministry of Finance and Ministry of Labor, imposing concrete masses that separate themselves from the street and diminish the scale of the individual. Palácio Capanema, in turn, was conceived as an open gesture toward the city, producing an elevated public ground plane, almost a civic plaza, where circulation and encounter remain possible.

The south façade extends as a continuous glass curtain wall, while the north façade incorporates *brise-soleil*, the first use of this system in Brazil, then a technical innovation, providing shading and climate control. The rooftop and mezzanine terraces hold suspended gardens designed by Roberto Burle Marx. Beyond serving as a document of modernist aesthetics, the building houses artworks by major Brazilian artists: six tile panels and four frescoes by Candido Portinari, and sculptures by Bruno Giorgi, Celso Antônio, and Alfredo Ceschiatti. Its program includes a theater, a library, and multiple institutional spaces.

Taken as a whole, architecture, gardens, interior design, artistic program, decorative elements, Palácio Capanema constitutes a singular work of art and a historical artifact. It reflects a specific moment in Brazilian history through architecture, landscape, and visual culture, while also embodying the political aspirations of the period. In this sense, it stands as both material and immaterial public heritage, a convergence of form, ideology, and cultural memory.

4. Discussion and Concluding Remarks

Today, Palácio Capanema houses, among other institutions, IPHAN, the federal agency responsible for its preservation as a listed heritage site, as well as FUNARTE, ministerial offices, and more recently, UNESCO.

IPHAN has recently submitted the building for consideration as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. If approved, the designation would enable funding for restoration. The proposal includes a technical restoration plan developed by a team from the School of Architecture and Urbanism at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ), detailing necessary interventions and emphasizing the cultural significance of the complex. Yet this situation raises an important question: *Why must restoration depend upon UNESCO's approval when the building already holds national heritage status and a full restoration project is complete?*

If the technical studies exist, were produced locally by specialists, and the building is undeniably relevant to Brazilian history and to the city of Rio de Janeiro, why the delay? Why wait for the endorsement of an international organization, even one as relevant as UNESCO, when a national institution such as IPHAN is fully mandated to lead this work?

Answering these questions, along with the hypotheses raised in the introduction, would require a detailed analysis of the current restoration proposal and of the circumstances that allowed the building to deteriorate under the supervision of the very agency responsible for its preservation. Financial limitations may be one explanation, but not necessarily the only one.

We cannot fully resolve these issues within the scope of this essay. However, we can formulate a hypothesis that helps illuminate the broader context.

Beginning in the 1990s, the rise of neoliberal ideology and the doctrine of the “minimal state” contributed to the abandonment of public cultural assets. If the state was framed as inefficient and intervention undesirable, investment in heritage infrastructure appeared secondary or expendable. This helps explain the degradation of Palácio Capanema and the limited long-term impact of the restoration undertaken between 1995 and 1999. While it is not our intention to enter partisan debate, especially in an electoral context, academic work demands critical analysis of structural patterns, and the data available support this interpretation.

Even after the decline of minimal-state ideology and the renewed role of public policy under the Lula administration, cultural heritage has continued to receive comparatively low priority when weighed against agendas of economic development and infrastructure. Although advances have been made, social spending itself is now recognized as investment, heritage and culture have yet to be fully incorporated into this logic. They remain conceptually adjacent rather than structurally integrated within citizenship-building.

Budgetary figures reinforce this. In the 2011 federal budget, the Ministry of Culture received only 0.16% of total expenditure, lower than the previous year's 0.23% and above only the Ministry of Fisheries (O Globo, 14/09/2010). Yet a parallel case offers cautious optimism: the restoration of the former Hospital São Francisco de Assis, also a historic IPHAN-listed property, which after decades of abandonment is finally being revitalized with BNDES funding through UFRJ partnership. The structure will return to public use, as all public heritage ideally should.

We acknowledge that a comprehensive investigation of these issues would require research exceeding the scope of the present essay. Our intention was never to exhaust the subject but to foreground questions, articulate a theoretical position, and open pathways for future scholarship.

Further inquiry should include a critical examination of both the previous and current restoration proposals for Palácio Capanema and a deeper mapping of the modernist ideology that shaped the building complex. Each of these alone could constitute the basis for a thesis.

What can be stated here is that the building's current condition, architecturally, symbolically, and in terms of occupancy, undermines its intended modernist principles of permeability, circulation, and collective encounter. A modernist building rendered static becomes an inert monument, contradicting the very logic of movement and openness that defined its conception.

We must resist the transformation of the city into a fortified enclave, a citadel structured around fear, exclusion, and the defense of private property, as allegorized in the Mexican film *La Zona*. Instead, we advocate for the vision articulated by Robert Pechman and Eliana Kuster: the city as a space of civic encounter, coexistence, and shared life, a public realm.

Public heritage, in this light, is not merely an asset to be guarded or displayed. It is a catalyst for experience, conviviality, and civic presence. In our view, the management of Palácio Capanema reflects a partial misunderstanding of the modernist ideals it embodies, revealing both institutional neglect and an inability to activate the building as living public space.

This requires a new cultural relationship, beyond Walter Benjamin's critique of heritage as a "cultural asset", accumulated, stored, commodified. Jeanne-Marie Gagnebin argues for a relation not defined by efficiency, profitability, or accumulation, but by possibility, gratuity, and critical openness. Culture, like history, is not a museum of fixed treasures but a field of unfinished signals, anticipatory, disruptive, and capable of imagining another future.

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